

Calling for a Thought on Food in Anglo-American Studies

Maria José Pereira Pires

Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies
ULICES – University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies

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1. Food: Holder of Interpersonal and Cultural Meanings

When we think of food, it is the well-known saying ‘tell me what you eat... and I’ll tell you who you are’ that commonly comes to mind.¹ Whereas this has always been taken as a truism in an individual sense, it is now more often used when characterising the identity of a country at a global level, plus the regional level through the different cultural and geographical resources of the country. Nonetheless, the relevant factor here is not so much “*you are* what you eat” — but “*what you eat* is what you are”. Recognisably, food, without which man cannot survive, is an unquestionable protagonist in the social, political and economic evolution of history. As Sarah Sceats argues, it is a basic social signifier, a holder of interpersonal and cultural meanings:

It is, and has been, constructed as symbolic in all sorts of ways, either intentionally (Passover, the Eucharist), through custom (harvest suppers and hot cross buns) or by commerce (the ‘ploughman’s lunch’); the resonances are, initially at least, culture-specific. (125)

¹ This well-known idea ‘Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es’ (Brillat-Savarin ix) was presented as an aphorism in *Physiologie du Gout, ou Méditations de Gastronomie Transcendante* (1826) by the French lawyer and politician, who gained fame as an epicure and gastronome, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and shortly after by the German philosopher and anthropologist Ludwig Feuerbach who used the truism ‘man is what he eats’ (‘Der Mensch ist was er ißt’), since Feuerbach stood in opposition to any philosophical system-building for an empirical study of how people respond to the world and to each other.

Accordingly, many of the important questions centre themselves on the ethical dimensions of foodways, agricultural practice, and cultural meaning; these are undeniably central to several pedagogies.² Yet, we can also flip this assertion around to suggest that many cultural and social questions can be answered by examining food. Our consumption of food takes place within a wider framework in which foods are produced, regulated, represented, and associated with specific identities (Ashley 60). From a historical perspective, the main fields associated with food consumption have been those concerned with diet, nutrition, and health. Therefore, it becomes understandable that a person's attitude toward food can reveal not just personality traits but an entire *food ideology*, as well; a set of beliefs that encompasses a whole way of thinking about the world, and usually an ideal way of being in that world.

2. Legitimizing Food-cultural Studies

As mentioned above, it becomes pertinent to approach the food-cultural studies and the so called 'state of the arts' in this area of knowledge in Anglo-American studies. The fact is that there has been a growing appreciation, acceptance, and even legitimacy of food-cultural studies as a distinct field. This seems to be a sign, to a certain extent, of the growing acknowledgment that ground-breaking scholarship often crosses disciplinary boundaries. Some believe that the identification of food-cultural studies as a discrete field is possibly not of much relevance in the academic environment. I question precisely the firmness of this statement based on the issue of their claimed inherent *interdisciplinarity*. There is no doubt about the usefulness of such collaboration, since it permits to understand phenomena and relationships, even though food-cultural studies is not a unified field. I believe it is necessary to build a solid framework of thought,

² The term 'foodways' aims at a vast cross-disciplinary approach to food and nutrition, studying food consumption on a deeper than concrete level. Besides food scholars, also anthropologists, sociologists, and historians often use this term to describe the study of why we eat what we eat and its meanings. An example is the refereed journal *Food and Foodways*, published by Taylor & Francis.

a verifiable one. Even though this was considered to have been somehow absent — mainly because of Jennifer K. Ruark's article "More Scholars Focus on Historical, Social, and Cultural Meanings of Food, but Some Critics Say It's Scholarship-Lite Selected Books in Food Studies" (1999) — it does not make that much sense these days.

Conversely, some scholars have been worried for the last decade that much of the research is so interdisciplinary that it lacks rigor. Steven L. Kaplan, a professor of history at Cornell University and one of the editors of *Food and Foodways* (the international journal that began publication in the late 1980s) is one of them. For him, some people were still not aware of what food is: "It's about the whole range of issues from feasting to fasting — from great famines and the humble efforts of ordinary people to forge a minimal survival diet, to the more extravagant and elaborate dimension of bourgeois self-indulgence and the aestheticization of food" (Ruark A19). I share his concern on some theoretical work in food studies, as he added in Ruark's article:

Before the rise of food studies in the humanities, food was treated only as fuel. [...] Now we have, paradoxically, the reverse problem: a great many people are talking about food in terms of vaguely symbolic language, without mooring it in the tension between the symbolic and the physical. (*Ibidem*)

One may also confirm that food studies approaches benefit from a certain freedom and creativity. This provides some balance from the strength offered by what otherwise could be considered a limiting disciplinary quality. This is implied by Carole Counihan when she answers that methodologically she works as an anthropologist (Miller 173). I share her feeling that food studies are necessarily "interdisciplinary in subject matter, in thinking, in theoretical and analytical approaches" (*ibid.* 173-174). Such a position does not oppose other methodologies, but differs from those who, similarly to Psyche Williams-Forsen, claim that food becomes the centre of analysis while they then use a variety of methods and theories to examine it (*ibid.* 196). Accordingly, Williams-Forsen does recognize the variety of methods one is able to employ "under the umbrella of food studies" (*ibidem*). I am, therefore, changing my view on food-cultural studies as being an interdisciplinary field to consider them a field in need

of a cross-disciplinary approach — where the several disciplines work together for the same goal (i.e. a project) but not necessarily merge with one another. Thus, there have been some attempts to work on that in the US and in the UK.

2.2. Prolific Publishing

In fact, the range of research concerning the field of food-cultural studies over the last fifteen years validates their increasing relevance to Anglo-American studies. One can see the way the food studies movement has encouraged scholars and students in long-established academic disciplines to follow a line of investigation on food themes. Publishing of scholarly work related to the role of food in society, culture, and commerce has also been facilitated. The last couple of years have also been prolific in terms of new academic journals on food studies, culinary history societies, and publishers who are announcing food series. The *Food 2013 Catalogue* presented by Berg (a Bloomsbury Company) is a good case in point. Berg, a Bloomsbury Company, for instance, presented the *Food 2013 Catalogue* with the following titles: *Writing Food History: A Global Perspective* (August 2012) edited by Kyri W. Clafin and Peter Scolliers; for October 2012 there is Shelley L. Koch's *A Theory of Grocery Shopping: Food, Choice and Conflict*, and *Culinary Capital* by Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco; *Food Words: Essays in Culinary Culture* (March 2013) edited by Peter Jackson and Warren Belasco, who are also editing with Anne Murcott *The Handbook of Food Research* (August 2013); Brian Gardner's *Global Food Futures: Feeding the World in 2050* (April 2013); David Evans' *Food Waste: Home Consumption, Material Culture and Everyday Life* (June 2013); Isabelle de Solier's *Food and the Self: Consumption, Production and Material Culture* (June 2013); Ken Albala's *The Food History Reader: Primary Sources* (August 2013); Nicola Humble's *The Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to Present* (September 2013); Kaori O'Connor's *The Never-Ending Feast: The Archaeology and Anthropology of Feasting* (September 2013); Christina Grasseni's *Alternative Food Networks* (October 2013); *Geographies of Food: An Introduction* (December 2013) by Mike Goodman, Lewis Holloway, Moya Kneafsey, and Damian Maye; finally for January

2014 there is the four-volume collection: *Food History: Critical and Primary Sources* edited by Jeffrey M. Pilcher, and *Fun Food: Children's Food Marketing and the Politics of Consumption* by Charlene Elliot. In 2011 Leo Coleman had already edited *Food: Ethnographic Encounters* and in 2012 Fabio Parasecoli and Peter Scholliers edited the set of six volumes *A Cultural History of Food*.

Some of these listed publications can be easily placed as reference publications, and others belong to History, Literature, Geography, Sociology, Anthropology, Material and Popular Culture, and Cultural and Communication Studies. This clearly shows the magnitude of the current interest in food issues, but also how the literary approach is outnumbered by historical and anthropological approaches in the food studies which are oriented towards the human sciences. In spite of this phenomenon, I witness a certain reluctance from some scholars in acknowledging what is here an evident interdisciplinary contextualization. It was at the British Sociological Association conference *Food and Society* organized by the Food Study Group in 2-3 July 2012 in London that this came to my notice.

2.3. A Call to Explore Complex Interactions

Also interesting is to check now the call for papers for the BSA in 2013 — “Food, Drink and Hospitality: Space, Materiality, Practice” held in June in London and organized in conjunction with *Oxford Gastronomica*, Oxford Brookes University, The British Sociological Association's Food Study Group and the *Hospitality & Society Journal*. They state that whereas philosophical enquiry has enriched the understanding of hospitality by providing intellectual legitimacy to its study as it broadens interest in that topic (Barnett; Derrida; Dikeç), it has also led to “abstract re-conceptualisations of hospitality and a tendency to use notions of hospitality to view relations at national, regional and city scales rather than at the level of everyday micro-geographies involving transactions of food and drink” (*The British Sociological Association*). In addition, they also claim that while there has been a tendency for this kind of work to deal with philosophical debates on hospitality and society neglecting commercial practices, for instance, other academics working with commercial

hospitality have for the most part disregarded abstract philosophical debates and perspectives.

With such a tendency in mind in this area, there have been efforts to build links between abstract and more concrete notions of hospitality — as well as between the social and commercial manifestations of hospitality — by a number of studies (Bell; Molz; Lashley; Lugosi; Lynch). Therefore, by inviting those who wanted “to explore the complex interactions between food, drink and hospitality, and to make explicit connections between the abstract and philosophical dimensions of hospitality and its material, embodied and sensual practices” (*ibidem*) the event attempted to build on this kind of emerging body of work. In other words, they expected to develop cross-disciplinary dialogue and, thus, encouraged contributions from colleagues working in sociology, anthropology, geography, history, philosophy, cultural and media studies, gender studies, business and management, design, literary studies, health and nutrition and psychology, plus any related fields. Finally, they also welcomed empirical and theoretical works using a variety of theoretical approaches and methods which comprise the following: Ethnographic, Symbolic Interactionist, Actor-Network Theory, Discourse Analysis, Visual Methods, Phenomenological, Post-Colonial, Critical Theory and Gender Studies Perspectives. Thus the question, has the so acclaimed interdisciplinary matter grown into a need for developing cross-disciplinary dialogue?

3. A Panorama of Culture through the Prism of Food

Looking back to what the American literary critic, feminist, and writer on cultural and social issues, Elaine Showalter, considered just a decade ago, in her piece “Food: My Dinner with Derrida” (2002), one can see how Showalter has looked at the semiotics of food possibly through Barthes 1950s semiotic analysis of steak and chips (Trubshaw): “The academic world [...] has changed a lot, and the food evolution has been semiotic as well as sustaining. Since the sixties, among both U.S. and U.K. scholars, food has signified sex, power, and art”. She travels from the 1960s when “food began to stand for erotic desires and possibilities” (Showalter) in the celebrated eating scene in the Tony Richardson’s movie *Tom Jones* (1963) to the end of the century — with the “wonderful 1999 memoir

My Kitchen Wars, by cookbook writer Betty Fussell, who described her discovery of sensuality in French cooking while she was at Princeton University in the 1960s” (*ibidem*) showing how each new food opened up new sexual analogues. Showalter summarizes this path in the following way:

[...] the academic men and women who were whisking in the sixties began traveling and tasting in the eighties and nineties. [...] I suppose it was inevitable that the next phase would be to make food, cooking, and eating an academic discourse — a breakthrough that may have come when Susan Leonardi, a professor of English at the University of Maryland, published an article on recipes in *PMLA*. (*Ibidem*)

No wonder there are references to Darra Goldstein’s observation at the beginning of this century, when this Williams College professor and cookbook writer who edits *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* (University of California Press) reflected on food as “one of the best ways to understand a culture and the rituals around it [since] you can see a panorama of culture through the prism of food” (*ibidem*).

Looking also at the American framework in a couple of academic institutions, Berg highlights the following projects: the master’s program in gastronomy in Boston University (1990s) which focused on the cultural and culinary aspects of food consumption; the admission to undergraduate, master’s and doctoral programs in food studies by the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University (1996), allowing by this means the legitimization of such an emerging field as a state-accredited academic entity; and the New York University programs that called attention to how individuals, communities, and societies relate to food within a cultural and historical context. Accordingly, food studies became “an umbrella term that includes foodways, gastronomy, and culinary history as well as historical, cultural, political, economic, and geographic examinations of food production and consumption” (Berg). As expected, this broad definition would raise issues concerning the scope, methodology, and acceptance of food studies as a distinct academic entity (*ibidem*).

3.2. The American Studies

In fact, according to Warren Belasco American Studies professors are inherently interdisciplinary, so they tend to venture confidently where more prudent scholars might be indecisive on where to tread and, as a food scholar, he feels “the compulsion to be useful and practical [since] the potential to join theory with practice is what brought [him] to the field in the first place” (302). In contrast, he considers that his own experience editing the food journal *Food, Culture & Society* has been rather cautionary, given that “food” covers so diverse areas — from dietetics to agriculture to media studies — and he is constantly being brought up short by how little he understands, knows, or wants to know: “As there is already so much to keep up with in my own specialty—modern US cultural history—can I really be knowledgeable and useful by encroaching on other people’s turf?” (*ibidem*). As a final point, Carolyn de la Peña comments on the relevance of being trained in American Studies:

This makes sense. As an interdisciplinary field, American Studies offers fewer cautions than other disciplines about dabbling in multiple methods (a little ethnography here, a little media studies there, a little history here, throw in some literary analysis). This is probably why we find ourselves on these frontiers that stretch—uncomfortably at times—our expertise. (Belasco 312)

As Charlotte Biltekoff points out, if one is to work with scientists, nutritionists and policy makers, one has to understand how these think and also have the tools to read their data through a cultural lens (*ibidem*). Accordingly, one has to acquire new forms of data on living people and current events. Considering herself mostly an historian, de la Peña claims to have often used her historical knowledge to create a surprising moment at a table of scientists only to have them perplex her by asking “what does your research show about that today” or “what do consumers say now”. Not being trained to pose similar questions or respond to those questions does not imply that she is not eager *to do so* as a food scholar who wants to influence the way food and nutritional knowledge are produced. Therefore, there is the feeling of a need to be aware of this gap between what one knows and what is in fact *usable information* for scientists,

nutritionists and policy makers, really admit that it matters (*ibidem*); and then, as Amy Bentley recommends, set off to perfect what she calls one's "methodological literacy". De la Peña concludes, though, that whilst humanities methods may be effective in revealing the cultural dynamics of food production and consumption, these same methods single-handedly end up being convoluted when one tries to "get from theoretical or historical data and patterns to the present moment with conviction" (*ibidem*).

While American Studies, as a celebrated interdisciplinary field, seems to offer fewer cautions than other disciplines about dipping into multiple methods, when it comes to food studies scholars working with other professionals they feel the need to take in the tools to read wide-ranging data through a cultural lens. Still, the questions raised most recently identify a further concern also specified by others than the American Studies. A good example is the 2013 Food Culture Studies Caucus of the American Studies Association (ASA) Conference held in Washington D.C.. This network was created for scholars who work on projects that connect the production, consumption, and representation of food across the numerous disciplines that cohere in American Studies. In view of that, this caucus intends to study food and eating culture since these present the prospect of a "radically cross-disciplinary and transnational re-engagement of key topics in studies of the Americas" ("Food Cultural Studies Caucus"). Furthermore, even though the caucus is aware of the interconnections with other Food Studies communities, it stresses how divergent it becomes when offering a choice for those who perceive food and eating culture as essential "to the themes that are at the forefront of American Studies, including race, class, gender and identity, immigration, community and diaspora, social and labor history, empire, globalization and state formation" (*ibidem*).

In the above mentioned conference, held in November 2013, there was a special session on "Food, Debt and the Anti-Capitalist Imagination" and at its centre was the way the contradictions of capitalism are sharply clear in the systemic collapse of both food production and distribution and, consequently, the recent debt crisis and austerity programs across the world. Thus, it was from diverse (inter)disciplinary perspectives that this panel sought to identify the relationship between food production/consumption and the capitalist mechanisms of domination together with

the resistance to that same domination. Among the three questions presented by the panel, I draw attention to the first one: “How does thinking about the relationship between food, debt, finance, and capitalism in general, require us to rethink paradigms of critique in the humanities and social sciences such as North/South, hemispheric and transnational relations, as well as those of class, race, gender, sexuality” (*ibidem*). There was an evident focus on the questions of food/fuel, profits and hunger, the urban/rural partition, abundance/scarcity, sustainability, food and consumerism, and finally on the question of food and austerity in the media, film and literature. In addition, there was an intention of making sense of food in a broader institutional and political context.

All in all, the recent calls on food studies presented here come to show the tip of the iceberg when considering their so acclaimed inherent interdisciplinarity — the same as with American Studies, for instance. As pointed out by Warren Belasco, one should be prudent when intruding in other disciplines and this cautionary suggestion brings light over a matter which I believe has developed more towards the need of a cross-disciplinary dialogue. Far from bringing the matter to a conclusion, this is merely a call for a thought on food.

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ABSTRACT

The growing acceptance and legitimacy of food-cultural studies as a distinct field seems to be a sign of the growing acknowledgment that ground-breaking scholarship often crosses disciplinary boundaries. Whereas some believe that the identification of food-cultural studies as a discrete field may not be of much relevance in the academic environment, I question the firmness of this statement based on the issue of their claimed inherent interdisciplinarity. The range of research concerning the field of food-cultural studies over the last fifteen years validates their increasing relevance to Anglo-American Studies. One can see the way the food studies movement has promoted scholars and students in long-established academic disciplines to follow a line of investigation on food themes. The last couple of years have also been prolific in terms of new academic journals on food studies, culinary history societies, and publishers announcing food series.

While American Studies, as a celebrated interdisciplinary field, apparently offers fewer cautions than other disciplines about dipping into multiple methods, when it comes to food studies scholars working with other professionals they take in the tools to read wide-ranging data through a cultural lens. Has the so acclaimed interdisciplinary matter grown into a need for developing cross-disciplinary dialogues?

KEYWORDS

Academia; Anglo-American Studies; food-cultural studies; interdisciplinarity

RESUMO

A crescente aceitação e legitimidade dos estudos culturais de alimentação enquanto uma área distinta parece ser um sinal do reconhecimento crescente de que estudos inovadores muitas vezes ultrapassam as fronteiras disciplinares. Considerando que alguns acreditam na identificação dos estudos culturais de alimentação como uma área discreta sem grande relevância no meio acadêmico, questiono a firmeza desta afirmação com base na sua alegada interdisciplinaridade intrínseca. A amplitude

da pesquisa nestes estudos ao longo dos últimos quinze anos valida a sua crescente relevância para os estudos anglo-americanos e é visível a forma como os estudos culturais de alimentação têm promovido estudos em disciplinas académicas há muito estabelecidas. Os últimos anos também têm sido prolíficos em termos de novos periódicos académicos em estudos de alimentação, da criação de sociedades de história da culinária e editores que anunciam publicações nesta área.

Enquanto os Estudos Americanos, reconhecidamente interdisciplinares, aparentam oferecer uma maior predisposição no uso de vários métodos, quando se trata dos estudos culturais de alimentação, os estudiosos que trabalham com outros profissionais tendem a ler dados abrangentes através de uma lente cultural. Ter-se-á a tão aclamada questão interdisciplinar transformado numa necessidade para o desenvolvimento de outros diálogos disciplinares?

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Academia; Estudos Anglo-Americanos; “food-cultural studies” (estudos culturais de alimentação); interdisciplinaridade
